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978-0-521-58234-6 - Gender and Literacy on Stage in Early Modern England

Eve Rachele Sanders

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In early modern England, boys and girls learned to be masculine or feminine as they learned to read and write. This book explores how gender differences, instilled through specific methods of instruction in literacy, were scrutinized in the English public theatre. Close readings of plays, from Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* to Thomas Dekker's *Whore of Babylon*, and of poems, didactic treatises, and autobiographical writings from the same period, offer a richly textured analysis of the interaction between didactic precepts, literary models, and historical men and women. At the cross-roads between literary studies and social and cultural history, Eve Sanders' research offers new insights into poems, plays, and first-person narratives (including works by women writers, such as Mary Sidney and Anne Clifford) and into the social conflicts that shaped individuals as the writers and readers of such texts.

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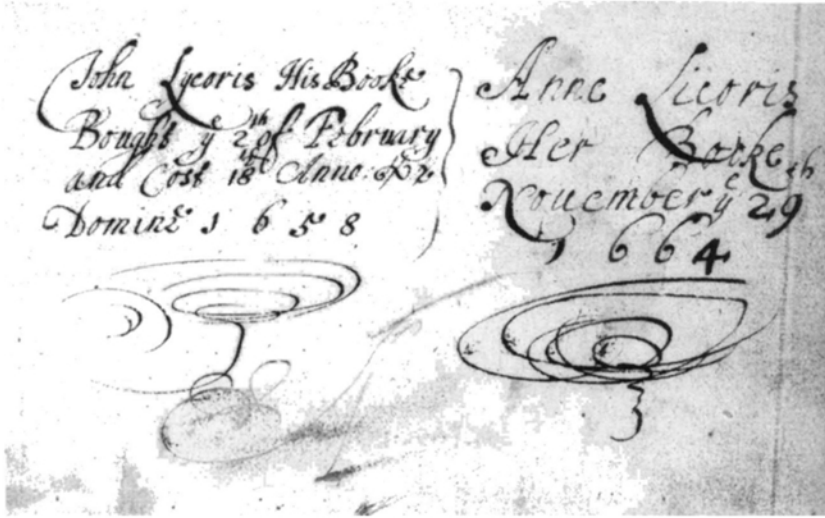
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Frontispiece. Inscriptions by two seventeenth-century book owners found in a copy of a writing manual by Edward Cocker. *Art's Glory. Or the Pen-Man's Treasure* (London, 1657).

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For my mother, Marilyn Sanders

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Preface

The spread of literacy in early modern England was accompanied by a redefinition of identities. New practices of reading and writing, unequally distributed between the sexes, helped to shape the contrasting models of male and female selves promoted in conduct manuals such as Richard Brathwait's *The English Gentleman* and *The English Gentlewoman*. In the public theatre, this reconfiguration of identities through literate practices was taken up as a topic by contemporary playwrights. While the first chapter surveys works ranging from medieval devotional texts to Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, it concludes with a reading of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*. This dramatization of social conflicts triggered by the creation of an exclusively masculine academy introduces the primary theme of this book: the place of the theatre in debate over sex-specific modes and means for acquiring learning. Chapter two turns to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to explore the problematic consequences of humanist pedagogy, in particular the predicament of the male reader, constrained in his actions by the principle of imitation, the imperative to emulate examples uncritically. Correspondingly, chapter three investigates dilemmas specific to the woman reader by analyzing Mary Sidney's *Antonius*, a translation of a French play about Cleopatra, in the light of rereadings of her text by male writers: Samuel Daniel's *The Tragedy of Cleopatra*, Samuel Brandon's *The Tragicomedy of the Virtuous Octavia*, and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. With the next chapters, the focus shifts from reading to writing. Chapter four traces the passage of a cultural paradigm, the male subject as writer, through the play *Richard III*. The fifth and final chapter contrasts the scribal practices of two actual women, Grace Mildmay and Anne Clifford, with representations of female writing by monstrous pen-women in Thomas Dekker's *Whore of Babylon*.

In preparing this book for publication, I have tried to convey a sense of what Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass term the "materiality of the text." In particular, the original, idiosyncratic spellings of the stage directions (indicating acts of reading and writing) that appear as epi-

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grams recall the actual books, marked by early modern typefaces, design conventions, and spellings, that circulated, along with quill pens, paper, and ink, as tangible stage props in the plays discussed here. In addition, I have kept intact the original spellings of middle English texts, when the edition chosen did so, as well as the deliberately anachronous spellings of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. However, I have not taken a strictly antiquarian approach which would have required reproducing not only the original spellings but also, in some cases, black letter type and various manuscript hands. For the rest of the early modern printed texts cited, therefore, contractions using tildes or superscript ("y^e" for "the") have been silently expanded, italics elided, commas substituted for slashes, and "i," "u," and long "s" replaced with modern "j," "v," and "s." Set beside these last texts, the works of Shakespeare and other writers cited in modern editions, will still appear strikingly current. In the spirit of the books discussed here, in which interpretive glosses were common, the reader is asked to take the variation between editions for what it is, an effect of different conventions, an engagement on our part, as readers and writers, with the complexities of the textual traces of our past.

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